Elite Darwinism: Why Positions of Authority Are Systematically Captured by Strategic Operators

A Theory of Competitive Selection in Religious, Political, and Institutional Hierarchies

Thomas J. Bryan

Abstract

This paper introduces **Elite Darwinism**, a theoretical framework explaining why positions of religious, political, and institutional authority are systematically captured by individuals willing to deploy those positions strategically—regardless of the original intent behind their creation. The theory proposes that in competitive environments, three types of operators emerge: Type A (purely sincere, unwilling to act strategically), Type B (sincere believers who act strategically), and Type C (cynical operators using positions instrumentally). Through a process analogous to natural selection, Types B and C systematically outcompete Type A, resulting in authority positions being held predominantly by strategic operators even when those positions were created with purely altruistic or spiritual purposes. This explains the recurring historical pattern whereby liberation movements (Christianity, Marxism, Buddhism) become tools of elite domination despite sincere founders. The theory has explanatory power across religious institutions, revolutionary movements, corporate hierarchies, and nonprofit organizations, suggesting a universal mechanism rather than isolated instances of corruption. Understanding Elite Darwinism reveals why structural reform—rather than individual virtue—is necessary to prevent the systematic conversion of liberatory institutions into mechanisms of control.

Keywords: Elite Darwinism, competitive selection, strategic operators, institutional capture, liberation theology, power dynamics, religious authority, political hierarchy, organizational corruption

---

I. The Puzzle: Why Liberation Becomes Domination

The Recurring Pattern

Throughout history, movements founded to liberate people from oppression consistently transform into new systems of control:

Christianity:

- Founded by Jesus of Nazareth, a Jewish teacher who challenged Temple elite and offered direct access to the divine
- Within three centuries, became state religion of Roman Empire under Constantine
- Developed hierarchical church structure mirroring the Temple system Jesus opposed
- Became tool of imperial control, justifying Crusades, Inquisition, and colonial domination

Marxism:

- Founded by Karl Marx, who analyzed how capitalist class exploited workers through ideology
- Within decades of Russian Revolution, became justification for Soviet totalitarianism
- Communist Party developed into new ruling class (nomenklatura) with privileges exceeding czarist aristocracy
- Became tool of state control, justifying gulags, purges, and authoritarian rule

Buddhism:

- Founded by Gautama Buddha, who renounced royal privilege to teach liberation from suffering
- Within centuries, became state religion in various kingdoms
- Developed monastic hierarchies and supported warrior classes (Zen Buddhism and samurai)
- Became tool of political legitimation, justifying hierarchy Buddha explicitly rejected

The French Revolution:

- Overthrew absolute monarchy in name of liberty, equality, fraternity
- Within years, produced Reign of Terror and Napoleonic dictatorship
- Revolutionary ideals used to justify authoritarianism

American Civil Rights Movement:

- Fought for racial equality and justice
- Major organizations increasingly captured by professional nonprofit class
- Radical demands transformed into corporate diversity initiatives
- Movement energy channeled into institutional structures that preserve rather than challenge power

The consistent pattern raises a fundamental question:

Why do liberation movements so reliably become new forms of domination?

Conventional Explanations Fall Short

Common explanations include:

1. "Power corrupts"

- Suggests individuals become corrupted after gaining power
- Doesn't explain why this happens so consistently
- Implies corruption is individual moral failing

2. "Revolution betrayed"

- Suggests movements are hijacked by bad actors
- Doesn't explain mechanism of hijacking
- Treats each case as unique failure

3. "Human nature is flawed"

- Suggests biological selfishness prevents altruism at scale
- Doesn't explain variation in outcomes
- Provides no actionable insights

These explanations describe the problem but don't explain the mechanism.

Elite Darwinism offers a structural explanation:

Positions of authority are subject to competitive selection dynamics that systematically favor strategic operators over purely sincere individuals, regardless of the original purpose of those positions.

II. The Theory: Competitive Selection for Strategic Operators

The Three Types of Operators

In any organizational hierarchy—religious, political, corporate, or nonprofit—three types of individuals compete for positions of authority:

Type A: The Purely Sincere

Characteristics:

- Genuinely believe in the organization's mission
- Unwilling to compromise principles for advancement
- Refuse to use their position strategically for personal or factional benefit
- Prioritize ideological purity over effectiveness

Strengths:

- Moral integrity
- Consistency with stated values
- Trusted by true believers

Weaknesses:

- Disadvantaged in internal competition
- Unwilling to build power networks
- Refuse political maneuvering
- Often sidelined or expelled

Type B: The Sincere Strategists

Characteristics:

- Genuinely believe in the organization's mission
- **Also willing to act strategically to advance it**
- Use political skills, build coalitions, compromise when necessary
- See no contradiction between belief and tactical flexibility

Strengths:

- Can build effective organizations
- Navigate political challenges
- Attract both idealists and pragmatists
- Balance principles with results

Weaknesses:

- May rationalize questionable actions as serving greater good
- Risk sliding toward Type C over time

Type C: The Cynical Opportunists

Characteristics:

- May or may not believe in the mission
- Primarily motivated by personal power, status, or wealth
- Use organizational position instrumentally
- Skilled at performing sincerity while acting strategically

Strengths:

- Unencumbered by ideological constraints
- Maximize strategic flexibility
- Excel at political maneuvering
- Ruthlessly effective at accumulating power

Weaknesses:

- Risk exposure if cynicism becomes obvious
- May lack genuine vision beyond self-interest

The Selection Mechanism

In competitive environments for positions of authority, a selection process operates:

Step 1: Competition for positions

- Religious hierarchies (priest, bishop, pope)
- Political offices (representative, minister, president)
- Corporate leadership (manager, director, CEO)
- Nonprofit organizations (program director, executive director)

Step 2: Type A systematically loses

Type A individuals:

- Refuse to build political networks ("that's not what we're about")
- Won't compromise on principles ("that betrays our mission")
- Don't engage in strategic positioning ("I just want to do the work")
- **Get outmaneuvered by Types B and C**

Result: Type A remains in low-level positions or gets marginalized

Step 3: Types B and C advance

Both Type B and Type C:

- Build coalitions and alliances
- Make strategic compromises
- Position themselves advantageously
- Navigate organizational politics
- **Systematically outcompete Type A**

Result: Leadership positions filled by Types B and C

Step 4: Types B and C are often indistinguishable

From outside, we cannot tell whether a leader is:

- **Type B:** Sincere believer acting strategically
- **Type C:** Cynical operator performing belief

Both:

- Claim sincere commitment to mission
- Act strategically to advance organizational interests
- Build power bases and networks
- Use position to influence outcomes

The difference is internal consciousness—which we cannot access.

Step 5: Over time, Type C may predominate

Additional selection pressure:

- Type B has ideological constraints (won't violate core principles)
- Type C has no such constraints (principles are performance)
- **In ruthless competition, Type C often outcompetes Type B**

Result: Top positions increasingly held by cynical operators

Why This Is "Darwinian"

The term "Elite Darwinism" references natural selection:

In biological evolution:

- Organisms compete for survival and reproduction
- Those with adaptive advantages reproduce more successfully
- Advantageous traits become more common over generations
- **Selection is blind—doesn't favor "best" in moral sense, only most reproductively successful**

In institutional hierarchies:

- Individuals compete for positions of authority
- Those with strategic advantages advance more successfully
- Strategic behavior becomes more common in leadership over time
- **Selection is blind—doesn't favor "best" in moral sense, only most politically successful**

Key insight:

Just as evolution doesn't produce "morally best" organisms, competitive selection for authority positions doesn't produce "morally best" leaders—it produces strategically effective operators.

And "strategically effective" means willing to use the position strategically, which Type A refuses to do.

III. Historical Examples: The Pattern in Action

Christianity: From Jesus to Constantine

The Founder (Type A/B):

Jesus of Nazareth:

- Jewish teacher challenging Temple elite
- Never held political office
- Never accumulated wealth
- Executed by Roman/Jewish authorities
- **Died poor, teaching liberation from elite control**

Evidence suggests Type A or B:

- Lived consistently with teaching
- Did not consolidate institutional power
- Did not protect himself from elite retaliation
- **Sincerity indicated by actions**

Early Movement (Mixed Types):

First-century Christians:

- Persecuted minority
- Genuine believers (Type A and B)
- Spread message through conviction
- Developed local church structures

The Transformation:

By 4th century CE:

- Emperor Constantine converts (312 CE)
- Christianity becomes legal (Edict of Milan, 313 CE)
- Council of Nicaea establishes orthodoxy (325 CE)

- Christianity becomes state religion (Theodosius, 380 CE)

Result:

- Church develops hierarchical structure (Pope, patriarchs, bishops)
- Positions of authority created at all levels
- **Elite Darwinism operates**

Who rises in church hierarchy?

- Those willing to navigate imperial politics (Types B and C)
- Those who can balance theology with power (Types B and C)
- Those who build networks and alliances (Types B and C)

Who gets marginalized?

- Radical ascetics refusing compromise (Type A)
- Those maintaining poverty and simplicity (Type A)
- Those challenging church wealth and power (Type A)

The outcome after several generations:

Church leadership:

- Predominantly Type B and C operators
- Church owns vast property
- Hierarchy mirrors Roman imperial structure
- Became tool of political control

Jesus's original teaching:

- "No mediator needed—direct access to God"

Church by medieval period:

- "No salvation outside Church—priestly mediation required"

Elite Darwinism transformed liberation theology into control mechanism.

Marxism: From Marx to Stalin

The Founder (Type A/B):

Karl Marx:

- German philosopher analyzing capitalism
- Never held political office

- Lived in relative poverty
- Died in exile
- **Spent life writing, organizing, challenging power**

Evidence suggests Type A or B:

- Could have sought wealth (had education and connections)
- Could have accommodated to bourgeois society
- Chose poverty and exile instead
- **Sincerity indicated by life choices**

Early Movement (Mixed Types):

Late 19th/early 20th century socialists:

- Workers' movements organizing
- Genuine believers in liberation from capitalism
- Developing party structures and unions

The Transformation:

After 1917 Russian Revolution:

- Bolsheviks seize power
- Communist Party established
- Civil War creates life-or-death competition
- **Elite Darwinism in extreme form**

Who rises in Party hierarchy?

- Those willing to use violence (Lenin, Trotsky, Stalin)
- Those who can navigate factional struggles (mostly Type C)
- Those who build networks and eliminate rivals (definitely Type C)

Who gets eliminated?

- Old Bolsheviks maintaining ideological purity (Type A)
- Those challenging Stalin's centralization (Type A and B)
- Anyone refusing to compromise principles (Type A)

The outcome by 1930s:

Soviet leadership:

- Stalin and Type C operators dominate
- Party becomes new ruling class (nomenklatura)
- Special stores, dachas, privileges exceed czarist aristocracy

- **Marxism used to justify totalitarian control**

Marx's original teaching:

- "Abolish class distinctions—workers control means of production"

Soviet reality:

- New class hierarchy with Party at top
- Workers controlled by bureaucracy
- Gulags for dissent

Elite Darwinism transformed revolutionary ideology into state control mechanism.

Buddhism: From Buddha to State Religion

The Founder (Type A):

Gautama Buddha:

- Indian prince who renounced royal privilege
- Rejected caste system
- Lived as wandering ascetic with begging bowl
- Taught liberation from attachment and suffering
- **Died having given up all power and wealth**

Evidence strongly suggests Type A:

- Literally walked away from kingship
- Could have consolidated power but refused
- Maintained radical simplicity until death
- **Extreme case of principle over power**

Early Movement (Mixed Types):

Early Buddhist monks:

- Followed Buddha's example of renunciation
- Genuine seekers of enlightenment
- Developed monastic communities

The Transformation:

Within centuries:

- Buddhism adopted by kingdoms (Ashoka in India, various East Asian states)
- Monastic orders developed hierarchies

- State support brings wealth and influence
- **Elite Darwinism operates**

Who rises in monastic hierarchy?

- Those who can manage monastery property (Types B and C)
- Those who can negotiate with royal patrons (Types B and C)
- Those who build institutional power (Types B and C)

Who remains at margins?

- Forest monks maintaining radical simplicity (Type A)
- Wandering ascetics refusing institutional ties (Type A)
- Those criticizing monastic wealth (Type A)

The outcome:

Zen Buddhism in Japan:

- Supported samurai warrior class
- Justified hierarchical society
- Massive temple complexes and wealth

Tibetan Buddhism:

- Developed tulku system (reincarnating hierarchs)
- Controlled Tibet politically
- Accumulated vast monastic wealth

Buddha's original teaching:

- Renounce attachment, reject caste hierarchy

State Buddhism reality:

- Hierarchical institutions controlling wealth
- Supporting political authority
- Justifying social inequality

Elite Darwinism transformed radical renunciation into institutional control.

Corporate America: The Same Pattern

The pattern isn't limited to religious or political movements—it operates in business:

Early startup culture:

- Founders passionate about product/mission
- "Change the world" rhetoric
- Informal, egalitarian structures
- Many Type A and B individuals

As company scales:

- Professional managers hired
- Corporate hierarchy develops
- Positions of authority multiply
- **Elite Darwinism operates**

Who rises to VP, C-suite, board?

- Those who navigate office politics (Types B and C)
- Those who build alliances and networks (Types B and C)
- Those willing to compromise mission for growth (Type C)

Who gets marginalized?

- Engineers focused purely on product (Type A)
- Those refusing to play political games (Type A)
- Idealists unwilling to compromise values (Type A)

The outcome:

Many tech companies:

- Started with idealistic mission ("don't be evil")
- Now led by professional operators focused on shareholder value
- Original mission diluted or abandoned
- Type C operators dominate C-suite

Example: Google

- Founded by engineers with "organize world's information" mission
- Now run by professional executives
- Advertising revenue prioritized over original mission
- **Elite Darwinism in tech**

IV. Why Elite Darwinism Is Universal

The Mechanism Operates Wherever Hierarchies Exist

Elite Darwinism doesn't require:

- Particular ideology (works in religious, secular, capitalist, communist systems)
- Particular culture (works across East/West, ancient/modern)
- Conscious conspiracy (operates through individual competitive behavior)

Elite Darwinism only requires:

- **Positions of authority** (hierarchical structure)
- **Competition for those positions** (multiple candidates)
- **Strategic advantage matters** (political skill helps advancement)

If these conditions exist, Type A systematically loses to Types B and C.

Why Type A Cannot Compete

Type A's fatal weakness:

They refuse to use the tools that win competitions for authority:

Type A won't:

- Build political networks ("that's not authentic")
- Make strategic compromises ("that violates our principles")
- Position themselves advantageously ("I'm not a politician")
- Play factional games ("we should focus on the mission")

Types B and C will:

- Build coalitions and alliances
- Compromise when tactically useful
- Position themselves strategically
- Navigate factional dynamics

In competitive environment, political skill matters.

Type A handicaps themselves by refusing to compete politically.

Result: Type A remains at bottom or gets expelled, Types B and C rise.

Why We Can't Distinguish Type B from Type C

This is critical:

From outside, Type B and Type C appear identical:

Both:

- Claim sincere commitment to mission
- Act strategically to advance organizational goals
- Build power bases and networks
- Use position to influence outcomes
- Succeed in rising through hierarchy

The only difference:

- **Type B:** Actually believes in mission, acts strategically to advance it
- **Type C:** Uses mission instrumentally, acts strategically for personal gain

This difference is internal consciousness—unknowable to observers.

This means:

We cannot know what proportion of leaders are Type B vs. Type C.

We only know:

- Type A doesn't rise (observable)
- Leadership is Types B and C (observable)
- Behavior of Types B and C is similar (observable)

Whether any particular leader is sincere strategist (B) or cynical operator (C) is unknowable.

The Type B → Type C Slide

Additional complication:

Type B individuals may become Type C over time:

The progression:

Year 1: Type B leader genuinely believes in mission, acts strategically to advance it

Year 5: Makes compromises that trouble conscience, rationalizes as necessary for greater good

Year 10: Original passion fades, institutional preservation becomes primary goal

Year 20: Can barely remember why they joined, now simply maintaining position

The transformation:

- Gradual
- Unconscious
- Rationalized each step

- **Type B becomes Type C**

This means:

Even if we could ensure only Type B (sincere strategists) gained positions initially, many would transform into Type C over time.

The structure itself corrupts.

V. Implications and Applications

Implication 1: Sincere Founders Don't Prevent Cooption

The lives of Jesus, Marx, and Buddha demonstrate:

Founder sincerity is real:

- All three lived consistently with teachings
- None enriched themselves
- None consolidated power
- All died without institutional protection

But founder sincerity is insufficient:

- Christianity was coopted
- Marxism was coopted
- Buddhism was coopted
- **Structure defeats even sincere founders**

Why?

Because Elite Darwinism operates after the founder dies:

- Movement grows
- Institutions develop
- Hierarchies emerge
- Positions of authority created
- **Competition for positions begins**
- Types B and C outcompete Type A
- Leadership captured by strategic operators
- **Original mission transformed**

The founder's sincerity cannot prevent this because:

- They're dead and can't control succession
- The structure itself creates selective pressure
- No amount of sincere intent prevents competitive dynamics
- **Elite Darwinism is structural, not dependent on individual morality**

Implication 2: "Better People" Won't Fix the Problem

Common response to organizational corruption:

> "We need better leaders—people of integrity and virtue."

Elite Darwinism reveals why this fails:

The problem isn't lack of virtuous candidates—it's that virtuous candidates (Type A) systematically lose.

In competitive environment:

- Type A refuses political maneuvering
- Types B and C engage in it
- **Political skill wins**
- Virtue without strategic ability = marginalization

Attempting to select "better people" results in:

- Selecting those who appear virtuous
- But Types B and C can perform virtue
- Cannot distinguish sincere from cynical
- **End up selecting strategic operators anyway**

The structure is the problem, not the individuals.

Implication 3: Structural Reform Is Necessary

If Elite Darwinism is structural, solutions must be structural:

Potential structural interventions:

1. Rotate positions of authority:

- Prevent long-term power accumulation
- Reduce incentive for strategic maneuvering
- Example: Sortition (random selection for office)

2. Eliminate hierarchy where possible:

- Flat organizations reduce positions to compete for

- Distributed authority prevents concentration
- Challenges: Difficult at scale

3. Transparent decision-making:

- Make political maneuvering visible
- Reduce advantage of behind-scenes networking
- Challenges: Information overload

4. Term limits:

- Prevent transformation of Type B → Type C over time
- Force regular leadership turnover
- Challenges: Loss of institutional knowledge

5. Formal checks on authority:

- Constitutional limits on power
- Separation of powers
- Independent oversight
- Challenges: Checks themselves become new positions subject to Elite Darwinism

None of these are perfect solutions.

But they address the structural problem rather than assuming "better people" will solve it.

Implication 4: Perpetual Vigilance Is Required

If Elite Darwinism is universal:

There is no final solution.

Every organization, movement, or institution:

- Will develop hierarchies (needed for coordination at scale)
- Will create positions of authority (needed for decision-making)
- Will see those positions subject to Elite Darwinism (structural dynamic)
- **Will require constant reformation to prevent capture**

This means:

Liberation is not a one-time achievement but an ongoing struggle.

Every generation must:

- Recognize when positions have been captured

- Challenge emergent hierarchies
- Reform or replace corrupted institutions
- **Fight the eternal battle against elite consolidation**

Accepting this is liberating:

- Stops us from seeking perfect solution
- Focuses energy on practical resistance
- Recognizes pattern will repeat
- **Prepares us for perpetual reformation**

VI. Comparing Elite Darwinism to Other Theories

How Elite Darwinism Differs from "Power Corrupts"

"Power corrupts" suggests:

- Individuals become corrupted after gaining power
- Problem is psychological (power changes people)
- Solution: Find incorruptible individuals

Elite Darwinism suggests:

- Strategic operators are selected into positions of power
- Problem is structural (competitive selection)
- Solution: Change selection mechanisms

The difference matters:

"Power corrupts" → Focus on individual virtue

Elite Darwinism → Focus on structural reform

How Elite Darwinism Differs from Conspiracy Theories

Conspiracy theories suggest:

- Coordinated elite plot to maintain power
- Conscious coordination among elite class
- Need to expose the conspiracy

Elite Darwinism suggests:

- No coordination required

- Individual competitive behavior produces pattern
- Emergent outcome of structural dynamics

Elite Darwinism is more robust because:

- Doesn't require conscious conspiracy
- Works through individual self-interest
- Cannot be defeated by "exposing" it
- **Operates through visible, understandable mechanisms**

How Elite Darwinism Differs from Marxist Class Analysis

Marxist theory focuses on:

- Economic class conflict (bourgeoisie vs. proletariat)
- Material base determining ideological superstructure
- Revolution to overthrow ruling class

Elite Darwinism focuses on:

- Selection dynamics within any hierarchical organization
- How positions of authority are captured
- Why revolutions reproduce hierarchies

Elite Darwinism explains what Marxism struggles with:

- Why communist revolutions produced new ruling classes
- Why Soviet bureaucracy replicated capitalist hierarchy
- Why "dictatorship of proletariat" became dictatorship over proletariat

Both theories can be complementary:

- Marxism analyzes economic exploitation
- Elite Darwinism analyzes how positions in any system (capitalist or communist) are captured by strategic operators

---

VII. Conclusion: The Tragic Pattern and the Path Forward

The Universal Pattern

Elite Darwinism explains the recurring tragedy:

Stage 1: Sincere founder creates liberation movement

- Jesus, Marx, Buddha, or any revolutionary leader
- Genuine commitment to freeing people from oppression
- Lives consistently with teaching

Stage 2: Movement grows and institutionalizes

- Success requires organization
- Hierarchies develop
- Positions of authority created

Stage 3: Elite Darwinism operates

- Type A refuses to compete politically
- Types B and C build networks and advance
- Strategic operators capture leadership positions

Stage 4: Mission transformed

- Original liberation theology becomes tool of control
- New elite emerges using movement's language
- Hierarchy reconstructed in new form

Stage 5: The cycle can repeat

- Reformation movements challenge corrupted institution
- New liberation theology emerges
- Eventually gets coopted again
- **Pattern repeats indefinitely**

Why Understanding This Matters

Recognizing Elite Darwinism allows us to:

1. Stop blaming individuals:

- Problem is structural, not individual moral failing
- Even virtuous people get selected out or corrupted
- Focus energy on structural change

2. Recognize the pattern across cases:

- Christianity, Marxism, Buddhism all follow same trajectory
- Not unique failures but universal mechanism
- Learn from pattern rather than treating each as isolated

3. Design better interventions:

- Structural reforms rather than seeking "better people"
- Rotation, transparency, limits on authority
- Perpetual reformation rather than final solution

4. Maintain realistic expectations:

- No perfect solution exists
- Pattern will reassert itself
- **Vigilance is eternal**

The Tragic Vindication

Elite Darwinism explains why:

Even the most brilliant, sincere liberators:

- Jesus understood belief as infrastructure
- Marx analyzed ideological control
- Buddha renounced all attachment

Could not prevent their teachings from being coopted:

- Christianity became imperial control mechanism
- Marxism became state control mechanism
- Buddhism became political control mechanism

This simultaneously:

- **Validates their analysis** (they correctly understood mechanisms of control)
- **Demonstrates the tragedy** (understanding couldn't prevent it)
- **Proves the theory** (if even they couldn't escape it, the pattern is structural)

The Path Forward

Elite Darwinism doesn't counsel despair—it counsels clarity:

We cannot:

- Eliminate hierarchies entirely (needed for coordination at scale)
- Prevent strategic operators from competing (human nature)
- Find perfect incorruptible leaders (Type A loses, can't distinguish B from C)
- Achieve final liberation (pattern reasserts itself)

We can:

- **Understand the mechanism** (Elite Darwinism explains how capture occurs)

- **Design structural interventions** (rotation, transparency, limits)
- **Maintain vigilance** (constantly monitor for elite capture)
- **Reform perpetually** (every generation fights this battle)
- **Focus energy correctly** (structure, not individual virtue)

The fight against Elite Darwinism is eternal.

But understanding the mechanism gives us:

- Better diagnostic tools (recognize capture early)
- More effective interventions (structural not personal)
- Realistic expectations (vigilance not final victory)
- **Strategic clarity for the perpetual struggle**

Jesus, Marx, and Buddha fought this battle.

They understood the mechanisms of elite control through belief.

They were defeated by Elite Darwinism anyway.

Not because they failed.

But because the structural pattern is that powerful.

Our task is to continue their fight.

With clear eyes about what we're facing.

And realistic understanding that victory is not permanent liberation but perpetual resistance.

That's what Elite Darwinism teaches us.

And that clarity—however tragic—is more useful than false hope for final solutions.

References

Theoretical Foundations

- Darwin, Charles. *On the Origin of Species*. London: John Murray, 1859.
    - Foundational work on natural selection providing analogy for competitive selection in hierarchies

- Michels, Robert. *Political Parties: A Sociological Study of the Oligarchical Tendencies of Modern Democracy*. New York: Hearst's International Library, 1915.
    - The "iron law of oligarchy" - related observation about elite consolidation in democratic organizations
- Weber, Max. *Economy and Society*. Edited by Guenther Roth and Claus Wittich. Berkeley: University of California Press, 1978.
    - Analysis of bureaucratic rationalization and routinization of charisma

Historical Cases

- Brown, Peter. *The Rise of Western Christendom*. 2nd ed. Oxford: Blackwell, 2003.
    - Transformation of early Christianity into state religion
- Conquest, Robert. *The Great Terror: A Reassessment*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1990.
    - Stalin's consolidation of power and elimination of rivals
- Gombrich, Richard F. *Theravada Buddhism: A Social History from Ancient Benares to Modern Colombo*. London: Routledge, 1988.
    - Buddhism's transformation from renunciant movement to state religion

Contemporary Analysis

- Michels, Robert. *Political Parties*. See above.
    - Still relevant analysis of how democratic organizations develop oligarchies
- Pfeffer, Jeffrey. *Power: Why Some People Have It and Others Don't*. New York: HarperBusiness, 2010.
    - Modern analysis of organizational politics and advancement

---

Acknowledgments

This theory emerged from examining recurring patterns across religious, political, and organizational hierarchies. The consistent transformation of liberation movements into control mechanisms suggested a structural explanation beyond individual moral failings or unique historical circumstances. Elite Darwinism provides that structural framework.

Copyright and Licensing

© 2025 Thomas J. Bryan

This work is licensed under a Creative Commons Attribution-NonCommercial 4.0 International License.

December 2025